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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000819

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMERICAN CENTER PROGRAM PROMOTES ETHNIC DIALOGUE
AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Classified By: Pol Officer Chelsia Wheeler for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Starting in January 2008, the American Center has conducted a Professional Development Program to bring together emerging leaders from throughout Burma to learn about human rights, democracy, and community activism. Graduates have joined local and international NGOs, created organizations of their own, and conducted successful projects, including rebuilding a school in the Irrawaddy Delta. The course, which builds core skills among young leaders and facilitates dialogue among ethnic groups, is an important element of Post's efforts to promote human rights, civil society, and democratic change. END SUMMARY.

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE

2. (C) From January to August 2008, two teachers from the American Center and Poloff conducted the first iteration of the Professional Development Program (PDP). The goal of the PDP is to bring together young people of diverse ethnic backgrounds to facilitate dialogue and cooperation while also encouraging them to become active in their own communities. Fifteen students attended the initial program, including from Shan, Chin, Kachin, and Rakhine states. The course covered a broad range of topics, including human rights and democracy, grant proposal writing, academic writing, and community research, as well as basic skills in computers and public speaking.

3. (C) The second PDP course began in mid-September and will run for three months. American Center teachers and Poloff personally recruited students from around the country, including Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, and Pa'O, seeking to identify active and emerging leaders who would benefit from the additional PDP training. The course has been improved in this second iteration to incorporate more hands-on learning, with students conducting community organization projects and research as part of the coursework. In addition, students write draft grant proposals, learn about funding sources for projects, and study democratic principles and practices, including those enshrined in the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence. The readings are intended to provide them with a basis to evaluate Burma's new constitution and the upcoming 2010 elections. Students will gain the skills and knowledge to enable them to spread the values of democracy and human rights to other parts of Burma, including some of the country's more remote areas.

PDP STUDENT SUCCESS STORIES

4. (C) PDP graduates have gone on to implement real changes

in their communities. Three students created their own civil society organizations and competed successfully for funding through the Embassy small grants program. For example, Khin Hla, a lawyer by profession, founded the Burma Laws Study Group for Peasants and Workers to teach peasants and day laborers from Rakhine State about existing Burmese labor laws. She will also raise awareness among participants about the role of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Burma and provide them with information on their rights and the GOB's commitments, such as those included in its Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the ILO.

15. (C) As another example, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw founded Action for People Living with HIV/AIDS. She will use her first Embassy small grant to conduct a tailoring and slipper-making training program for men and women with HIV/AIDS. U Tun Naing created a group called Rays for Youth, which provides community development training to Rakhine youth who have migrated to Rangoon. The training covered topics such as gender equality awareness, intellectual property rights, and NGO organization and management.

16. (C) Two other students went to Chiang Mai University on a scholarship to attend a civic empowerment program. One started work as the Nargis activities coordinator for Metta, a prominent Burmese organization that conducts environmental and capacity building projects throughout the country. Another now works for the International Rescue Committee. Separately, 11 of the 15 students from the first PDP course pooled contacts and resources to help rebuild a monastic school in the Delta that was destroyed in Cyclone Nargis.

RANGOON 00000819 002 OF 002

COMMENT

17. (C) The early returns on the American Center's PDP program are promising: it has proven effective at giving emerging leaders (many hand-picked for participation because of their background and potential) the skills and tools they need to become effective community organizers, while also building new networks among ethnic groups. In just the span of a few months, the alumni of the PDP have already made a difference in their communities, including in Rakhine and Kachin States, and the Irrawaddy Delta. The PDP course is also an important vehicle for promoting human rights and democracy in Burma, and as such Post is looking at expanding the program and membership in the coming months.

VAJDA